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ABSTRACT

High school administrators are concerned about the contribution of student absenteeism to poor academic performance and the likelihood of dropping out. Administrators are faced with the difficult task of deciding which incentives will make regular school attendance more meaningful to students, and which penalties may make truancy and class cutting less attractive. Responses from six urban high schools studied from 1983 to 1985 indicate that the most important ingredients in reducing absenteeism are the following: (1) a computerized system of monitoring and recording absences; (2) political alliances with teachers and parents committed to reducing truancy; (3) consistency in imposing penalties for repeat offenders; (4) creation and support of intervention programs; and (5) patience and the will to persevere through early implementation problems. Summaries of the programs to reduce truant behavior are cited for three high schools in Portland, Oregon; one in Eugene, Oregon; and two in Louisville, Kentucky. (MLF)

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THE PRACTITIONER

nassp

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

Vol. XIV, No. 4 (ISSN 0192-6160) May, 1988

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Coping with Student Absenteeism

The high school principal's responsibility to deal with student absenteeism, never easy, has been made more difficult by recent public demands for more responsive schools. In earlier days, secondary school administrators viewed the management of student attendance as a routine matter: 1) taking a daily roll of students, 2) supplying the district with daily attendance figures, and 3) disenrolling students no longer attending. Today, however, concern is much greater about the contribution of student absenteeism to poor academic performance and the likelihood of dropping out. Administrators feel increasing pressure to take stronger action in dealing with the problem.

The first step toward reducing absenteeism is to improve the information available on truant behavior. Administrators are creating more precise systems for monitoring and recording truancy, especially, selective class cutting. But this increase in managerial precision is not always an immediate source of reassurance to the administrator. Many administrators discover that the official figures on daily absenteeism, compiled on the basis of whole-day absences, seriously underestimate the actual problem. In some instances, twice as many students are missing particular classes as are absent for the whole day. Indeed, when a school reports to the district that 1 student in 10 was absent for most or all of a given day, the truth may be that nearly 1 student in 3 missed at least one class that day.

The reasons for the large number of selective absences are not hard to find. High school campuses became more open in the late 1960s and 1970s, and students enjoyed increased access to automobiles. Students began to take advantage of these new opportunities to meet away from classrooms or to leave the school grounds for part of the day, sometimes to visit local shopping malls and fast-food stores. This produced an increase in class cutting.

The consequences of class cutting can be as serious as those of full-day truancy. Law enforcement officials receive complaints about student loitering and vandalism. Teachers report difficulty in maintaining their instructional schedules when so many students miss class. Counselors indicate that students fail classes because of excessive absences. Students who fail several times realize that they cannot graduate with their class, and then drop out of school.

Administrators are faced with the difficult task of deciding which incentives will make regular school attendance more meaningful to students, and which penalties may make truancy and class cutting less attractive. Unfortunately, these questions are not easy to answer. It is not obvious what will motivate a high school student who is turned off to school. Nor is it obvious that schools have powerful penalties at their disposal.

Let us look at some recent administrative responses to this quandary, especially in six urban high schools that were studied from 1983 to 1985. The responses include new techniques in monitoring and recording student absences, penalties imposed for truant behavior, and interventions with chronic truants.

Monitoring and Recording Absences

The major innovation in information gathering is computerizing the process. One large urban district has used its mainframe IBM computer to centralize the task. The district supplies schools with computer lists of students enrolled in each class. Teachers are asked to mark absences on these lists for each period. The marked lists are returned to the office and the data entered on terminals connected to the district computer. Keyboarding is reduced by using machine-readable forms and optical scanning machines. The district provides each school with daily lists of students who missed class the preceding day and, upon request, with summaries for individual students.

Administrators at other schools have set up school-level computer operations with similar components. Districts provide money for the school to buy and install microcomputer systems.

A major headache for administrators trying to improve information gathering is how to distinguish reliably between excused and unexcused absences. Although schools generally encourage parents to phone in advance, most schools also require written excuses within a set number of days after the absence. Updating computer records with this information can be cumbersome. Some centralized systems in the early stages of development cannot accommodate updates indicating which absences have been excused. School-level microcomputer systems tend to be more flexible in this regard, because of ready access to the actual records. Some centralized systems are acquiring similar flexibility. In any case, continual updating of records requires coordination between teachers and office staff, and this can be a demanding task for administrators.

Skepticism is widespread among school personnel about the absentee excuses presented by students or even by parents. Some suggest that it would be better to eliminate the distinction between excused and unexcused altogether: An absence is an absence. The strongest argument for this simplification of policy is that it would save school resources now devoted to

the processing of excuses. However, simplification could unfairly penalize students absent for unavoidable causes (e.g., illness). It could also hinder administrators from focusing on students who are really beating the system.

The uncertainty and ambiguity of the excuse process often motivates attempts to be more precise in notifying parents about absences. Some schools use an automated dialing system to reach parents when large numbers are involved, when there are too many for personal telephone calls. It is also possible to link a computer directly to the dialing system and obviate the need to "keyboard" lists of telephone numbers. A staff member directs the computer to retrieve both the names of absent students and their telephone numbers, and then send this information directly to the automated dialing system. Some schools using automated systems still prefer to make personal phone calls to parents of selected at-risk students, because the tape-recorded message is rather impersonal and vulnerable to interception by students at home.

Imposing Penalties for Unexcused Absences

Administrators use various penalties to deter students from whole-day truancy and selective class cutting. Schools may disenroll students after an established number of consecutive days of unexcused absence. Parents must then re-enroll them to return to school. Many administrators are reluctant to disenroll students, primarily because it is not a useful deterrent to truancy. Most administrators prefer to focus on less drastic and more suitable penalties. There are two types: academic and administrative.

1. Academic penalties are regarded as the natural consequence of absence--losing points for a quiz given or homework due, poor performance on a test covering the period of absence, and a resulting lower grade in the class. Some teachers, in addition, artificially lower the grades of students with excessive absenteeism. This controversial practice is often officially prohibited, but some districts or schools seem to tolerate it. A more severe penalty is reduction in credit; not only the grade, but the number of credits earned, is reduced. Some schools have experimented with a policy disenrolling a student from a specific class after reaching a predetermined number of unexcused absences. This policy, however, has been successfully challenged by advocates for students.

   In general, academic penalties are effective only with students who are concerned about their academic records.

2. Schools have developed administrative penalties to deter even academically uncommitted students. The following are typical:

- Assigning detention after school;
- Requiring that students have a routing slip signed each day by all teachers and a parent;
- Excluding students from participation in cocurricular activities, including school athletic teams;
- Requiring that students attend Saturday school; and
- Suspending students from school.

Several obstacles exist to using penalties as deterrents. The practice requires accurate and timely records of all unexcused absences. It also requires a staff willing to play a police role. Many teachers and counselors dislike imposing penalties or reporting truant behavior. Some parents vigorously protest the penalties, especially exclusion from team sports and Saturday school.

Administrative penalties possess a drawback similar to academic penalties. They work for the occasional class cutter who is fully integrated into the school community, but not so well for the chronic truant who is indifferent to membership in that community. Suspension from school may even be a reward for the alienated student.

A basic problem with all penalties is that they use aversion to punishment to force students to participate in school. They do not build positive motivation. The coerced attendee becomes the classroom teacher's discipline problem. Many teachers prefer that these students not come to school.

In addition, the imposition of penalties is restricted by the legal requirements of due process. Appeals and reviews can prolong conflict and preoccupy administrators who come to resent the disproportionate call on their time for these unrewarding activities.

For all these reasons, administrators are increasingly seeking alternatives to coercive penalties. They are developing positive interventions to increase student commitment to school.

Intervening for Greater Student Commitment to School

Administrators working with chronic truants must confront students' personal problems and their anti-school subcultures. Administrators can often capitalize on their own gifts of persuasion to initially influence students. Long-term solutions, however, require that they organize and coordinate the efforts of other staff members, including teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and special education personnel.

Some school administrators ask teachers to confront students immediately following absences and to refer chronic truants promptly to counselors. Some require counselors to review the attendance records of their particular group of students, call in individual students as warranted, and develop short lists of students to be monitored on a weekly or even daily basis.

Administrators themselves often become involved in the monitoring and counseling of chronic truants. This can create a role conflict. Insofar as these administrators are responsible for imposing penalties, they can be torn between personal caring and their obligation to enforce the rules impartially. Some administrators seek to resolve this dilemma by balancing strict enforcement of penalties with efforts to reform a curriculum that is not working for these students. Some schools operate special programs for chronic truants and other at-risk students. The students are organized into a smaller community within the school. They attend classes together. Their teachers function as their advisers. These special programs, like continuation schools, have a simplified curriculum and focus on building a positive climate to motivate students to stay in school. These alternatives attempt to change the school as well as the student.

Some administrators are using positive motivational techniques for the whole school to improve school spirit and reduce the number of dropouts. They endeavor to build satisfying experiences for students in all aspects of school life--academics, athletics, and social activities. They believe that daily success will motivate students to attend regularly.

How Absence Reduction Policies Are Working

The ultimate criterion for evaluating efforts to monitor, record, penalize, and correct truant behavior is reduction of that behavior. Before evaluating evidence of truancy reduction, however, it is important to recognize that schools vary greatly in how they implement new policies. Assessment of implementation must precede assessment of effects.

1. Schools with new monitoring and recording procedures can expect some initial turbulence. Installing a computerized system generally disrupts the management of attendance for the first year of operation. Some plans prove too costly; some hardware is late in arriving and prone to malfunction; appropriate software is hard to identify. Staff retraining disturbs existing practices, and training time demands can be exorbitant. Administrators report long days and weeks during this period.

2. During the early period of implementation, conflicts among staff members can arise from anxieties that attendance management is falling apart. One school had to "write off" its fall attendance records because it allowed its manual recording procedures to lapse while it implemented a new computerized system. Problems in system implementation led to a mid-year decision to discontinue the system, and the school was left with incomplete data on attendance for the fall term.

   Some schools maintain previous recording procedures during the early period of implementation, but this strategy can generate faculty and office staff discontent over the duplication of effort. Patience is the key word during the labor pains of implementation.

3. Another implementation problem arises from the fact that administrators are not always prepared for the unwieldy amount of data generated by computerized systems. Some complain about inch-thick printouts of daily absences that they have little time to study. During the early years of any centralized system, the district may not be able to respond to all requests for specific information. As computer printouts pile up, administrators may actually experience a decline in relevant data, particularly about students of special concern.

4. To make matters worse, the precision of computerized systems is sometimes undermined by the lax reporting habits of some teachers. Teachers vary in how quickly and accurately they submit class absence lists for entry into computerized systems. Comparisons with records in teacher grade books indicate that sometimes fewer absences are reported to the office than are recorded. Teachers and counselors also vary in how regularly they update school records on excused absences. This potential problem makes it imperative that administrators provide clear directions for reporting and correct patterns of noncompliance promptly. Otherwise, teachers may take their cue from those who exhibit the least effort.

5. Parents are not always cooperative with monitoring efforts. Some parents refuse to respond to school phone calls about their student's absences. Some are indulgent in writing excuses for non-legitimate reasons. Some even lie to the school to protect their offspring. This problem highlights the importance of efforts to inform parents from the outset of legitimate reasons for absence and to confront parents who send phony excuses.

6. Resistance and inconsistency can plague the penalty process. Teachers vary greatly in willingness to impose academic penalties for absence. Some teachers seek to protect students from administrative sanctions. Others overuse administrative referrals to rid their

classes of unwanted students. Any inconsistencies in imposing penalties for truant behavior can lead students to believe they are immune or to complain about perceived unfairness of treatment.

7. School administrators sometimes find that teachers are less than enthusiastic about winning over chronic truants. Teachers may see their work as easier and more productive when truants are permanently absent. Administrators are sometimes frustrated by parents who disregard communications from the school, or when confronted, plead helplessness. Of course, parents of chronic truants may have personal and social problems. Unfortunately, administrators are expected to take responsibility for conditions beyond their ability to influence.

It is important to realize that what administrators say they are trying to do may be quite different from what is actually happening in a school. Students may not take seriously the school's efforts to increase attendance. Student attitudes about attendance rules seem to reflect their own inertia. School reports of dramatic improvement are sometimes associated with minor shifts in student attitudes. Evaluating new policies simply in terms of quick changes in truant behavior is dangerous. Experience suggests that truant behavior can be highly resistant to change. Principals must gauge the depth to which new policies have penetrated the school culture.

Some Findings from Research

The study that serves as the basis for this analysis uncovered some interesting findings.

- Differences exist between schools that serve similar populations in their rates of truant behavior. In a comparison of two high schools enrolling students from lower-income families in the same district, the rate of class cutting was lower at the school with the stricter administrator and teachers. That school was also more involved in personally contacting parents.

- The study uncovered no evidence of changes in rates of truant behavior within a year or two after new policies were initiated. A follow-up interview in one school three years later, however, indicated that class cutting had been cut in half. A delayed effect was also reported by another school. The length of time for new policies to take effect may be explained by resistance to the increased precision and the penalties described above. Evidence also exists that middle-class (especially upper middle-class) students use student government to oppose new policies on class cutting. The change in school culture required by a crackdown on rampant class cutting may involve prolonged conflict before new norms of student behavior are established.

- The initiation of new policies to reduce truancy is often accompanied by an increase in faculty satisfaction and morale. Teachers appreciate administrator's efforts to grapple with the problem, particularly if they are strict with truants and provide timely feedback. Staff commitment is probably the critical factor during the initial, frustrating years of policy implementation.

- There is some evidence that school administrators are identifying positive incentives to motivate students to regular attendance. The illustrations below show that a variety of small rewards for regular attendance can contribute to a general improvement in attendance. These strategies are positive rather than negative, but, like penalties, they may prove more effective with the occasional than with the chronic truant.

- Less evidence was found that school administrators are developing effective interventions with chronic truants. Most administrators admitted that their intervention programs served only a small proportion of at-risk students and, even within this group, were effective at most with half the students. Given limited funds and counseling personnel, it may not be realistic for schools to expect much from direct interventions. Yet, without effective interventions, new attendance management strategies remain costly and without any real payoff. Hence, great need exists for imaginative and dedicated leadership in creating and sustaining new intervention programs.

To recapitulate, high school administrators are heavily invested in increasing managerial precision and the enforcement of penalties for truant behavior. Many administrators are searching for effective interventions to use with at-risk students. The most important ingredients in these efforts to reduce absenteeism are the following:

1. A well-articulated plan for converting to a computerized system of monitoring and recording absences;

2. Political alliances with teachers and parents committed to reducing truancy;

3. The will to persevere through early implementation problems;

4. Consistency in imposing penalties for repeat offenders;

5. Skill in creating and supporting intervention programs; and

6. Patience and more patience.

The persistence of truant behavior stems from the difficulty of tightly organizing public schools, the ambivalence of school personnel toward low-performing students, and the influences of peer culture. Reducing truant behavior will remain a perennial challenge to school administrators. Present evidence shows that persistent and collaborative efforts can make a difference.

To Illustrate

The following high schools have recently undertaken major initiatives to reduce student truant behavior. All are urban schools.

South Eugene High School — 400 E. 19th Ave.
Don Jackson, Principal — Eugene, Oreg. 97401
Wanda Johnson, Vice-Principal

Five years ago, South Eugene High School decided to reverse an upward trend in class cutting. Although South's students come largely from a university community where academic motivation is high, the student body had adopted a norm of selective class cutting. On some days, as many as one in three students missed at least one class.

The school streamlined its attendance monitoring and recording system with a school-level microcomputer system that kept timely and accurate records of student class absences. Turnaround time was reduced by having attendance forms read by a scanning machine. The computer system was directly connected to an automatic dialing system to notify parents each night of any absences. Finally, a Saturday School was instituted for repeat offenders; the alternative was suspension.

School administrators encountered initial resistance to this tightening of policies by some teachers, students, and parents. The school persevered through initial problems, however, and has reduced class cutting by half. Vice-principal Wanda Johnson reports that the school is now expanding early intervention strategies to salvage chronic absentees.

Central High School — 1130 W. Chestnut St.
Mrs. Geneva Hawkins, Principal — Louisville, Ky. 40210

Central High School is a "downtown" school. In recent years, Central has made steady and significant progress in improving its attendance rate. A key ingredient is the principal's expectation for student attendance. Central has striven to create a positive school climate. Part of this effort includes positive incentives for outstanding attendance. With the assistance of a Jefferson County Public Schools' social worker, Central has developed a program of rewards for students with near-perfect attendance. These rewards

include recognition ceremonies, inexpensive items like pens and key rings, and eligibility for cash prize drawings. Some rewards are given at the end of semester; others, as often as every week. The school supports this program by entrepreneurial effort and the assistance of local businesses. Businesses also collaborate with the Jefferson County Public Schools, of which Central is a part, in a new Partnership Program to guarantee jobs for at-risk students who complete high school.

Cleveland High School
Robert O'Neill, Principal

3400 S.E. 26th Ave.
Portland, Oreg. 97202

Cleveland High School has moved in the last several years from a manual attendance monitoring process to a completely computerized system using the Portland Public Schools' IBM mainframe computer. The district is increasingly able to provide Cleveland's administrators with the variety of analyses they need for school-level decision making. School administrators are focusing their energies on at-risk students who often are chronic absentees. Cleveland schedules these students into a special class for daily monitoring of attendance and grades. The school is pilot testing a group counseling program this year for these students. Principal O'Neill says that, with its recent initiatives, Cleveland has reduced class cutting by half.

Lincoln High School
Judith Lachenmeier, Principal
Chet Moran, Vice-Principal

1600 S.W. Salmon St.
Portand, Oreg. 97205

Lincoln High School employs many of the same procedures as Cleveland. Lincoln has also developed its own special strategy for reducing absenteeism, called the "Lincoln Lotto." On Lotto days, an administrator draws a student ID number from a pool. If that student had perfect attendance and no tardies the previous day, he or she wins $5 and is recognized in the daily bulletin. If not, the bulletin gives the student's name and states that he or she was unable to collect the prize. Then the prize increases to $10 the next day, and so forth. Vice-Principal Chet Moran says that this strategy has real impact on student attitudes, because students try to stay eligible for the prize.

Roosevelt High School
George Galati, Principal

6941 N. Central St.
Portland, Oreg. 97203

Roosevelt High School's efforts to reduce student truancy include a combination of penalties and positive interventions. The interventions have been integrated into a comprehensive dropout prevention program. Among the

more innovative features of this program, older students are assigned as "big brothers and sisters" to ninth graders. Another component features counselor presentations on the importance of regular attendance to a student's school career and graduation. Roosevelt, according to Principal George Galati, is now concentrating on monitoring at-risk students in the ninth grade. Monitoring efforts are directed by a team of two social studies teachers who, with the help of two classified staff members, monitor student absenteeism, tardiness, and schoolwork. To date, the dropout rate has been reduced by at least 4 percent.

Shawnee High School
Harold Fenderson, Principal

4018 W. Market St.
Louisville, Ky. 40212

Shawnee High School has recently improved its attendance as part of a broad campaign waged by the principal to raise staff expectations and to establish student norms of behavior. Principal Harold Fenderson emphasizes personal contact in communicating his philosophy to teachers and students. He believes that schools have to build students' motivation by providing opportunities for success every day. Compliments have to outweigh criticism if students are to succeed. Curriculum watering down is neither encouraged nor needed. Instead, Shawnee staff members make it clear that they care students are in school and working for success.

Administrators gain parents' support by regular conferences. Students who have been repeatedly truant enter into a contract in which they promise to maintain good daily attendance, no class cutting, and a "C" grade average. For at-risk students, the school also uses a daily log of teacher observations to build student self-esteem through positive reinforcement.

This Practitioner was developed by Ken Duckworth, associate professor of foundations of education at the University of Louisville. The two-year study of urban high schools mentioned in the text was conducted by Duckworth and John deJung, professor of education at the University of Oregon.

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